DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 366 CS 213 820

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TITLE Classical "Topoi" and the Academic Commonplace.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Persuasive Discourse; *Rhetorical Invention
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse Communities; Bartholmae (David); Classical Rhetoric; Composition Theory; *Historical Background

ABSTRACT

An investigation of the various ways the term "topos" is used in classical rhetoric reveals the limited range of invention strategies offered by academic discourse pedagogy. Donald Bartholmae's work on basic writing addresses the relationship of the commonplace to topical invention within academic discourse. Investigation of the history of rhetoric reveals five categories of topoi: (1) dialectical; (2) particular; (3) propositional; (4) common; and (5) predicable. The belief that composition students should have access to a wide range of invention strategies justifies investigation of any academic discourse pedagogy that focuses on the particular and the propositional topoi of a specific discipline at the expense of the variety of common and predicable topoi shared by all disciplines. Composition courses should offer students an introduction to the general means of persuasion under the genus "topoi." Instructors should also introduce students to the two species of general and specific topoi; and to their further sub-species, the dialectical, the common, the predicable, the particular, and the propositional. Students should move from the general to the specific, from a wide range of general strategies for analyzing whatever knowledge they discover and produce in any rhetorical situation in and outside academia to an understanding that specific discourse communities in and outside academia expect particular means of persuasion. (SAM)

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Classical Topoi and the Academic Commonplace

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The purpose of my talk is to summarize briefly my research into the variety of ways the term topos is used in classical rhetoric and to use that historical context to accentuate the limited range of invention strategies offered by academic discourse pedagogy.

My study of topical invention was originally initiated by my reading of David Bartholomae's work on basic writing. For example, in his 1985 essay "Inventing the University" he discusses the ways basic writers should be prepared to enter the realm of academic writing. As he describes these students, they are placed in remedial courses because "[i]t is very hard for them to take on the role--the voice, the persona--of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis, or research" (136). He writes:

> What our beginning students need to learn is to extend themselves, by successive approximations, into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions and necessary connections that determine the "what might be said" and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community. (146)

It was this use of the term "commonplace" and its relationship to topical invention within academic discourse that led me to investigate the history of topoi.

Grimaldi, in his Studies in the Philosophy of

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Aristotle's Rhetoric, writes that there are two kinds of topoi: the "material" topoi one uses to understand the subject-matter under discussion by investigating its defining characteristics, its properties, its genus, its accidental qualities; and the "formal" topoi one uses to discover the generally accepted modes of inference, such as reasoning by cause and effect or by analogy. In many modern college composition texts, the discussion of the material topoi falls under the heading of "invention," and the discussion of the formal topoi falls under the heading of "reasoning" or "developing arguments" and, more often lately, "critical thinking." But in my research, I've discovered that there are more categories than just these two and that there may be a number of ways to organize them into categories. I've discovered five categories of topoi; they include the dialectical, the particular, the propositional, the common, and the predicable.

DIALECTICAL TOPOI: In his treatise on dialectics titled Topica, Aristotle claims his purpose "is to discover a method whereby we shall be able to reason from generally accepted opinions about any problem set before us and shall ourselves, when sustaining an argument, avoid saying anything self-contradictory" (I.i). This method involves the application of a variety of topoi to dialectical propositions which are predicated in four main ways: by definition, by property, by genus, and by accident. For example, in regard to propositions predicated by an

accidental quality, Aristotle recommends the following topoi:

> One commonplace is to look whether your opponent has assigned as an accident something that belongs in some other way. This mistake is usually committed in respect of genera, for example, if someone should say that white happens to be a colour; for white does not happen to be a colour, but colour is its genus. (II.ii)

These topoi are best defined as generally accepted strategies for analyzing the predication of propositions, and I've named them "dialectical" because they are topoi to be used in philosophical discussion about any subject whatsoever.

PARTICULAR TOPOI: In On Rhetoric, Aristotle describes a method whereby an orator might discover the available means of persuasion in three specific kinds of speech-making situations. For each of these, Aristotle claims that there are rhetorical topoi that a speaker may use to develop the speech. For example, in book I he describes the topoi relevant to the creation of deliberative speeches: political topoi, ethical topoi, and topoi about constitutions. In regard to political topoi, he writes, "The important subjects on which people deliberate and on which deliberative orators give advice in public are mostly five in number, and these are finances, war and peace, national defense, imports and exports, and the framing of laws" (I.iv.7). These five subject areas are the "particular

topoi" or places where a maker of deliberative speeches can go in order to discover the generally accepted opinions of the community. For instance, if a speaker is to propose action in public finance, that speaker should know in detail the sources of revenue and the list of expenses and should investigate not only the possible solutions in one's own city but also what is available in others (I.iv.8). These particular, "rhetorical" topoi are distinct from the dialectical topoi described in the Topica because they are designed to provide a method whereby an orator might discover what is generally believed about specific subjects rather than provide a formal method whereby one might analyze the predication of a specific proposition.

PROPOSITIONAL TOPOI: In book II of On Rhetoric, Aristotle describes emotional, ethical, and logical appeal. The chapters on emotional and ethical appeal also list topoi, but these are even more specific than the three kinds of topoi designed to promote inquiry into a particular subject. These chapters list actual propositions (or what we normally think of as "commonplaces") about emotions and character. For example, Aristotle states the following generally accepted opinions about the young, "In terms of their character, the young are prone to desires and inclined to do whatever they desire. Of the desires of the body they are most inclined to pursue that relating to sex, and they are powerless against this" (II.xii.3). For clarity's sake, we might distinguish these kinds of topoi from the

particular topoi by terming them "propositional." Instead of offering ways of discovering propositions, Aristotle offers the commonplace propositions themselves.

COMMON TOPOI: During his discussion of logical appeal later in book II, he elaborates upon the forms arguments take: examples, maxims, and enthymemes. In regard to enthymemes or rhetorical syllogisms, Aristotle introduces the twenty-eight topoi that can be used to create enthymemes in all three species of rhetoric. For instance, if I wanted to deliver a speech recommending a specific action in regard to public finance, I would have to know what our current resources and expenditures are. Using the particular topos related to this subject area, I might discover that an imbalance in revenue and expenses has caused the federal deficit. This discovery, gained by referring to one of the five political topoi, the particular topos on finance, could next become a premise with which I might construct an enthymeme and deduce a call to action. The formal choices available for organizing the syllogistic structure of such an enthymeme would be provided by a "common" topos. Aristotle describes the first of these common topoi as follows:

> One topos of demonstrative [enthymemes] is that from opposites [ek ton enantion]; for one should look to see if the opposite [predicate] is true of the opposite [subject], [thus] refuting the argument if it is not, confirming it if it is, for example [saying] that to be

> temperate is a good thing, for to lack control is harmful. (II.xxiii.1)

Therefore, if I were to use a particular topos on the subject of the public finance to discover the premise "Our imbalance in revenue and expenses results in a federal deficit," I might use the common topos of arguing from opposites in order to deduce that "The budget should be balanced so that we will not have a deficit." Again, this common topos is only one of the twenty-eight common topoi or enthymemic options available. Common topoi are distinct from particular, propositional, and dialectical topoi to the degree that common topoi recommend formal ways of arriving at new conclusions. However, common topoi are similar to the interrogatory purposes of dialectical topoi because they can be used to investigate possible logical inferences. They are distinct because dialectical topoi respond to specific predications for the purposes of philosophical discussion and common topoi respond to specific propositions for the purposes of discovering the available means of persuasion.

PREDICABLE TOPOI: The fifth kind of topos and the fourth kind of rhetorical topos is found in Quintilian. In his Institutio Oratoria, Quintilian describes topoi as "secret places where arguments reside, and from which they must be drawn forth" (V.x.20). These he further divides into two classes: propositions drawn from the accidental qualities or "places" of persons and propositions drawn from

the accidental qualities or "places" of things. Whereas in Topica Aristotle listed the dialectical topoi that were useful for interrogating propositions predicated by accident, definition, genus, and property, here Quintilian suggests a topical means for inventing propositions by selecting among a subject's possible predicates; these I've termed "predicable" topoi. According to this system, propositions may be taken from the accidental qualities of people including birth, nationality, country, sex, age, education and training, bodily constitution, fortune, social condition, character, occupation, personal ambition, past life, previous utterances, emotions, and names (24-31). The accidental qualities of things include causes, time, place, occasion, instruments, and means (32-52). He expands this list further with predicable topoi about things that draw from definitions referring to a particular quality, genus, species, difference, or property (53-64). These topoi are distinctive to the degree that they offer general strategies for predicating the qualities of almost anything and anyone.

According to Grimaldi's division of topoi, I would include the dialectical and common in the category of formal topoi and the particular and predicable in the category of material topoi. But because the propositional topoi do not provide a method so much as the actual arguments themselves, I would assign them to a third category and term them "commonplace" topoi. Another option would be to use the categories "general" and "specific," and include the

dialectical, common, and predicable in the "general," and the particular and propositional in the "specific" category.

ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: After completing this investigation, I looked again at Bartholomae's claims about topical invention to discover the kinds of topoi he would have us promote in academic discourse. In Facts, Counterfacts, and Artifacts, Bartholomae and his colleagues describe a reading and writing course for basic writers in which students investigate a specific academic discipline and discover the particular ways of knowing (or the particular and propositional topoi) that are the accepted means of persuasion in that discourse community. This practice in the analysis of a particular academic discourse community should, according to Bartholomae, help students recognize that each academic discourse community has specific ways of analyzing and producing knowledge and that students should be prepared to investigate each and every discipline accordingly. Subsequently, these students are introduced to a particular kind of common topos (and I would term this topos the "academic commonplace of counterfactuality") to revise the ways of knowing discovered in that field. In "Inventing the University," Bartholomae defines the formal structure of this topos by referring to the advice given to him by one his teachers:

> I had a teacher who once told us that whenever we were stuck for something to say, we should use the following as a "machine" for producing a paper: "While most

readers of _____ have said _____, a close and careful reading shows that _____" (153).

In The New Rhetoric, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca characterize this topos as the commonplace of quality whose persuasiveness depends upon the appeal of the unique and the new. In this case, they argue, "the speaker is anxious to completely remove certain elements in order to enhance others: he rather tries to subordinate them, to reduce them to those he considers fundamental" (97). If in Bartholomae's system of invention students are taught a two-step process whereby they first learn ways of knowing in a specific academic discipline, and then by using the topos of the new and unique, learn how to convert those old ways of knowing or old means of persuasion into new ways and new means, students have access to a limited number of topical invention strategies.

CONCLUSION: If we agree that students in composition should have access to a wide range of invention strategies, any academic discourse pedagogy that focuses on the particular and the propositional topoi of a specific discipline at the expense of the variety of common and predicable topoi shared by all disciplines should be questioned. In fact, we might use the common topos of genus to analyze and comment upon this issue: "To what degree should freshman composition serve academic discourse and to what degree should freshman composition serve the larger world of discourse in and outside of academia?" Obviously,

it can serve both because academic discourse is a species of the world of discourse. But difficulties arise when freshman composition is asked to choose between two masters; that is, when the question is posed as if academic discourse and the world of discourse are two distinct categories. I believe we have a broader mission in our composition courses; we should offer students an introduction to the general means of persuasion under the genus "topoi", to its two species: "general" and "specific" topoi, and to their further sub-species: the dialectical, the common, the predicable, the particular, and the propositional; we should have our students move from the general to the specific, from a wide range of general strategies for analyzing whatever knowledge they discover and produce in any rhetorical situation in and outside academia to an understanding that specific discourse communities in and outside academia expect particular means of persuasion. It should be a course in rhetorical inquiry that moves from the common strategies of invention and argument to the commonplace requirements of particular discourse communities.

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